

ARTICLE

# EU strategic approach to resilience in the Western Balkans

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In order to assist in developing capacities and in establishing institutions capable of withstanding these external pressures, the EU has placed a particular emphasis on state and societal resilience in neighbouring countries. Resilience is an internal attribute, defined in the EU Global Strategy (EUGS) as the ability to respond to and tackle challenges, and in a sovereign context resilience focuses on the capability and adaptability of the state. This article identifies the drivers of fragility and sheds new light on the operationalization of the concept of resilience in the Western Balkans.

On 9 March 2017, the European Council held a discussion on the Western Balkans and acknowledged the “fragile situation” in the region and the “internal and external challenges the region is facing”, while at the same time reaffirming the Union’s commitment to strengthening the prosperity, stability, and security of the Western Balkans. In this context, the identified fragility in the region stems from an interplay of external and internal challenges.

The internal fragilities countries in the Western Balkans are facing stem from their weak economic performances, with their GDP being close to one third of the EU-28 average, and significant gaps in many aspects of a functional democratic system. This creates an environment in which these countries are exposed to external influences that sometimes tend to be incompatible with the EU’s and the region’s shared vision of the future.

## Western Balkans fragilities

Despite some progress, the obstruction of the rule of law and the lack of democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans remain major barriers to EU accession. There is a need to increase legal certainty, reinforce the independence of the judiciary, fight impunity, and tackle corruption and organized crime in a systemic manner. The (distant) promise of accession is not sufficient to address these deficiencies. The emphasis the EU puts on security and stability of the region sometimes tends to appear more important than democratic values enshrined in the EU treaties and its foreign policy documents.

Moreover, this apparent importance and preference given to security led the EU to accept ‘strongmen’ in the Balkans instead of insisting continuously and vocally on the development of genuinely democratic, strong and resilient institutions. The instability in FYROM/Macedonia following the elections in April this year portray the consequences of such preferences. Subsequently, the Western Balkan leaders fully understand that stability has a high value to the EU and that by procuring stability, at least on the surface, they could get away with almost anything at home.



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*“The internal fragilities countries in the Western Balkans are facing stem from their weak economic performances.” Photo taken in Belgrade, Serbia. Jugoexport was an import-export firm established in 1953.*

This particular situation has led to a rise of anti-EU sentiment across the region, in particular among the more liberal, pro-European elites. Moreover, as Bandović and Dimitrov argue, the EU accession process has “run out of steam” and, even worse, the accession path “seems like a road to nowhere”<sup>[1]</sup> Coupled with the reservations held by certain member states about the transformative power of the enlargement process, especially after Bulgaria and Romania joined the Union, the pro-European sentiment in the Balkans – which until recently was strong – is waning.

**The lack of accountability of political actors as regards the rule of law, the rise of ‘strongmen’, and poor economic development trends are the main drivers of internal fragility in the region**

Furthermore, the democratic backsliding is apparent in almost all Western Balkan countries. The latest Freedom House’s *Nation in Transit* report portrays Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and FYROM/Macedonia as hybrid regimes whereas Montenegro and Serbia are only considered to be semi-consolidated democracies. Regional leaders often express their commitment to reforms, yet at the same time they tighten their grip on ever weaker institutions.

The issues of corruption, lack of an independent judiciary, and declining freedom of the press are not being tackled, which substantially diminishes the quality of democracy in the region. Moreover, a rise of authoritarianism presents one of the biggest internal fragilities, which ultimately leads to erosion of achieved reforms, structural stability, institutional independence, and democratic values. For instance, cases of corruption involving high officials are often disregarded and downplayed by governments, which causes a general mistrust in the judiciary across the Western Balkans, and ultimately a perception of impunity.

Public administrations in the region also suffer from inadequate administrative capacity and a lack of transparency which, coupled with the absence of a functioning media landscape, creates substantive problems for the functioning and further development of democracy in the Western Balkans. Therefore, the lack of accountability of political actors with regard to the rule of law, the rise of ‘strongmen’, and poor economic development trends represent the main drivers of internal fragility in the region.

These drivers of fragility create avenues for external forces to exercise their influence more strongly. When it comes to the EU, a major blow to the integration was made by Commission President Juncker’s statement that enlargement would not take place during his mandate, while at the same time aid from the EU has in fact increased and the accession process continues. While it was obvious for technical reasons, the statement resonated strongly in the Western Balkans as a sign of waning political commitment from the EU. Moreover, the Trump Administration in the United States has thus far shown little to no interest in the Balkans. This created new pathways for other actors to (re)emerge, such as Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf States.

### **Emergence of new actors in the region**

Russia has exercised a particularly emboldened soft power influence in the region. By creating and funding multiple news outlets and by overtly supporting certain political parties, the Kremlin manages to undermine the EU’s influence in the region, and to revive ethnic tensions to some extent. Russia’s goal in the region appears not so much to attract the Balkan countries to the Russian model but foremost to create instability at the EU border. In Montenegro, Russia was accused of being implicated in an attempted *coup d’état* on the day of the parliamentary elections in October 2016.<sup>[2]</sup> Moreover, the Kremlin is supporting nationalist movements in Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Macedonia and Serbia. Serbia in particular has thus far refused to align its foreign policy to that of the EU, and openly avoided any convergence on the official EU foreign policy toward Russia and China.



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*Meeting of the '16+1', China and 16 heads of government from Central and Eastern Europe, in Bucharest, November 2013.*

China's diplomatic influence is spreading through the Western Balkans via its '16+1' initiative, which evolved into a complex networking platform, granting the countries in the Western Balkans a prominent role in China's Belt and Road Initiatives.<sup>[3]</sup> What was regarded a bizarre diplomatic initiative in 2012 in its inception, '16+1' today represents a comprehensive tool for the exercise of Chinese influence in Europe.

The involvement of other actors is noticeable as well. During the Balkan wars in the 1990s, Turkey openly supported Bosnian Muslims and Kosovo Albanians. Moreover, ever since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) rose to power, Turkey intensified its economic and diplomatic activities in the region by engaging more strongly with Balkan states.

Lastly, the increased presence of the Gulf States in the region is visible through two separate issues – the rise of Wahhabism in the Western Balkans, and controversial economic presence. According to Filip Ejodus the influence of the Gulf States in the Balkans is reflected in the fact that "Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are the European countries which have produced the highest number of foreign fighters per capita who joined armed groups in Iraq and Syria"<sup>[4]</sup>

## The prolonged accession process has created a new set of challenges, not only for the Western Balkan countries concerned but also for the EU in its immediate neighbourhood

Furthermore, investments such as the ones in Sarajevo and Belgrade cause controversy. The assumed EUR 3.5 billion investments in Belgrade Waterfront led to a vocal dispute in Serbia, after a *lex specialis* was adopted in 2015 to give the investors exclusive rights which are in conflict with local laws. In addition, the United Arab Emirates bought 49 percent of *Air Serbia*, the Serbian national air carrier, in a direct deal with the government of Serbia for which the contract has still not been made public.

### **What the EU does and should do**

The prolonged accession process with the Western Balkans has created a new set of challenges, not only for the countries involved in the process but also for the EU in its immediate neighbourhood. With this in mind, and applying the concept of resilience, the EU attempts to sustain and further advance the progress made in transforming these countries into genuine democratic societies based on respect for the rule of law, freedom, and democracy. And these efforts are made in a period when the Western Balkans is increasingly becoming a playground on which rival powers strive for influence, in something that seems like a proxy, in a call for a different international order.

The political commitments of a “credible accession process grounded in strict and fair conditionality” made by the EU are setting the foundation for fostering resilience in the Western Balkans. Although signs of increased engagement by the EU and certain member states such as Germany, France, Italy, and Austria are visible, progress in the accession process of countries that have delivered results is badly needed. The credible political commitment will increase the EU’s leverage to insist that aspiring EU members conduct sustainable and irreversible reforms thus further enhancing their resilience to internal and external shocks.



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*In 2013 the United Arab Emirates bought 49 percent of Air Serbia, the Serbian national air carrier.*

Resilience in the region could be additionally bolstered by expanding cooperation in certain areas regardless of the accession stage, be it potential, candidate or negotiating country. One such example is deployment of European Border and Coast Guard teams in Macedonia and Serbia, the countries most affected on the ‘Balkan Route’ for migration. Activities of this kind would prevent stagnation of the region as a whole, and encourage reforms while accommodating diverse capacities among the states involved.

By supporting civil society, assisting government to build and nurture strong institutions, investing in physical and human infrastructure, and by empowering constituencies eager for democratic change, the EU can promote resilience when addressing complex domestic policy issues.<sup>[5]</sup> In addition, the EU member states, on a bilateral basis or through mini inter-governmental processes such as the Berlin Process, can contribute towards reaching the full potential of the transformative power of the EU’s enlargement policy.

The protest that took place in Sarajevo in 2014, in Belgrade on 2016 regarding the Belgrade Waterfront project, followed by the *Stop Diktaturi* protests after the presidential elections in Serbia in 2017, and the widespread protests in the Macedonian capital Skopje against the captured state, revealed that local constituencies are widely dissatisfied with the political elites. In addition, the expressed discontent demonstrates a sense of empowerment and still present belief in democratic transformation among the local populations.

While these protests did not reach a point of creating of a critical mass, they solidly indicated that voters will hold political elites accountable and that they are ready to challenge the rising autocratic tendencies across the region.

## **Conclusion: the main burden is still on the EU**

In conclusion, while it is obvious that fostering resilience to internal and external shocks is primarily in the interest of the local actors, the main burden still remains on the EU. Undeniably, the EU has shown a strong interest in fostering resilience in its neighbourhood, which includes the Western Balkans. Therefore, during the accession negotiations, the EU is one of the key drivers of resilience in the region, as it is in the position to influence the strengthening of local stakeholders other than governments. It has the opportunity to establish clear red lines when it comes to media freedom, the rule of law, pressure on independent institutions, and other topics of high relevance to the accession process, but also local constituencies across the Western Balkans, making them more resilient to shocks in the long run.

## **Noten**

[1] I. Bandović & N. Dimitrov, 'Balkan strongmen and fragile institutions', *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Report 35, Paris, August 2017, pp. 81-87.

[2] See Nevenka Tromp, 'Montenegro and NATO membership: an achievement and a risk? (<https://spectator.clingendael.org/nl/publicatie/montenegro-and-nato-membership-achievement-and-risk>)', *Internationale Spectator*, May 2017.

[3] A. Vangeli, 'The impact of China', *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Report 35, Paris, August 2017, pp. 57-62; see also Michal Makocki's contribution to this Dossier.

[4] F. Ejodus, 'The impact of Turkey and the Gulf States', *Resilience in the Western Balkans*, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Report 35, Paris, August 2017, pp. 51-57.

[5] D. Reljić, 'The impact of Russia', *Resilience in the Western Balkans*. European Union Institute for Security Studies, Report 35, Paris, August 2017, pp. 43-51.

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